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Since Aug. 1 through Friday, Liberal has recorded 2.42 inches of rain officially, with some areas reporting much more. That much rain was a 32 percent increase in the total year-to-date accumulation. Year-to-date now stands at 9.63 inches. The resulting rapid growth of weeds has put residents and city crews behind when it comes to cutting weeds, such as the ragweed outburst in this lawn. L&T photo. Rachel Coleman

Rainfall prompts weed explosion, code violations

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

No Southwest Kansas resident can object to rain, after three years of drought. As he drives around town, city code enforcer Kory Krause says it's a relief to see green lawns instead of dead brown yards — that is, until the green gets out of control.

“It’s a good problem, but it’s still a problem,” he said. “Our city ordinances require property owners to keep their yards trimmed and anything taller than 12 inches is a violation.”

With almost-daily rains over the past few weeks, Krause said, “people haven’t been able to keep up with mowing their lawns. Now the weeds are so bad, we’re having to go out and mow.”



In the past, when the city observed a violation of the weed ordinance, Krause said, code enforcers typically issued a notice to property owners. The warning was a courtesy. The law does not require the city to give advance notice, though the code enforcement department always publishes the ordinance at the beginning of the summer to remind residents of the law.

If a property owner fails to comply with the ordinance, the city sends a crew to mow the area. The price is hefty: \$150 for the first hour, and \$40 for each additional hour.

“We don’t like to do it,” said Krause, “but when property owners don’t take pride in their yards and lots, it reflects poorly on the city as a whole.”

During his three years on the job as code enforcer, Krause said drought conditions must have hindered the weeds’ growth, because he’s never seen Liberal as weedy and shaggy as it looks this year.

The situation reached a critical point just as public school and college resumed, an unfortunate

combination.

“I’ve had three helpers all summer, and they did the mowing for us,” Krause said. “It just so happens that the rain came right when they went back to school. We can’t keep up.” With fewer workers, the city’s code enforcers cannot afford to spend time issuing five-day warnings. Krause hired contractors to mow, but even so, the problem is overwhelming.

“I have people out mowing all day, every day, and there are still complaints coming in,” he said. Most often, the calls come from neighbors voicing unhappiness about a nearby lot or yard that has gotten out of control.

More problems crop up when a crew responds.

“Once we show up to mow, it’s too late,” for the property owner to avoid the fine, Krause said. “We’re trying to start with the worst yards and lots, and once we get there, we are obligated to cut.” In the past, he said, property owners sometimes tried to persuade crews to leave, promising to take care of the offending grass and weeds.

“We found out that doesn’t work,” he said. “Then we would end up going back a second time, so we went to a strict policy.”

Krause said summer may end soon, but the mowing will most likely continue for several more months.

“Last year, we mowed until October,” he said, “and that was in a drought. I don’t know how much longer this will go on.”

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